

Exercise As We Age

As Corporate America gets older, the baby boomers are finding it harder to adhere to a healthy and active lifestyle. Anyone, from the receptionist answering phones to the CEO closing 7 figure deals, can have terrible eating habits, less time to exercise, and more stress than they are meant to endure. These environmental stresses speed up the aging process, thus contributing to the deterioration of the body. Throw in a crazy travel schedule and bad sleeping habits, and you have your average American. Because of these stressors, 1 in 3 Americans is considered obese and struggles with weight issues. Our lack of activity is actually killing us, and the older we get the more important exercise becomes.

So why do people refuse to exercise even a little bit? There are too many reasons to list, but often I hear, "I don't know where to start." In a sea of misinformation and in an unregulated fitness industry, it is almost impossible to know where to begin. The gym can be a dangerous place if you do not know how to use the equipment. As an expert witness, I have seen improper form and misuse of equipment that leaves me speechless. My advice to those confused about what to do is to start by finding a reputable professional, who has an accredited certification and who can list doctors as references.

As we age if you get hurt it takes longer to recover. For this reason err on the side of caution when starting a program. Regardless of age the most common injuries are low back and shoulder. Very often, these injuries are simply a result of poor exercise form or performing the wrong exercise in general. Starting out at a high intensity and doing complex exercises may seem like the best avenue for fast results, but more often than not, it results in injury. It is crucial to take a person's daily activities and orthopedic issues into account before prescribing exercise. For example, if you sit all day and have low back pain or discomfort, sit ups and leg raises may actually make your condition worse. Planks, chops and deadbugs are safer and more effective alternatives for the core. In addition, some machines are not designed properly and can contribute to injury. For instance, some seated leg presses can stress the lower back and cause pain and/or injury. For the lower body, it is safer to start with a ball squat or step up instead of a machine, so as not to disrupt natural movement patterns.

As we age, we lose muscle mass and flexibility, and our balance degrades. Posture is a major problem, especially for corporate America, because they sit for so many hours, often without breaks. It is important to create a solid foundation for an active lifestyle and focus on exercises that attain personal goals. Performing balance exercises, stretching and correcting postural distortions are critical to participation in daily activities. Without these exercises, the likelihood of daily pain and injury is markedly increased. Stretching and core strengthening will eliminate most of common everyday aches and pains.

Balance, mobility, postural training, and circuit training with weights at a 50-60% intensity are a great start for the older sedentary population. It might sound easy, but if you haven't been exercising for a long time, it will be plenty challenging. It is important to remember that we are all individuals with different strength and weaknesses, so what may be easy for one person may be impossible for another person. Do not just copy exercises that surround you in the gym. Remember that you are a unique

individual and your workout needs to be tailored to your specific needs. A majority of older clients who were not athletes or workout buffs in their youth have no interest in looking like a fitness model or a bulging Adonis on the beach. They just want to feel better and live longer. More than half the battle is the training consistency, not the training intensity. If a client does a low to moderate level workout and follows a fairly healthy diet, he/she will feel better and have health benefits, even if he/she is only exercising a couple of days per week. The bottom line is some exercise is better than no exercise.

I have worked with many older clients, and in fact, my oldest was 90 years old. In my experience, I found that exercise programs do not include enough flexibility training and intensity is usually too high. Many professionals believe you must train at a high intensity to get any substantial results. There is plenty of reputable research that shows higher levels of intensity can be a better use of time compared to low to moderate levels of exercise. The majority of these professionals will insist that regardless of your age, you need to build your workouts up to intensities beyond 80-90%. While there is truth to the science behind this theory, the experts fail to explain that working out at lower levels is still extremely beneficial. They don't take into account that at higher intensities, injury risk is increased, and a majority of older individuals are not interested in exercising at that level and will never stick to that sort of program. Others cannot train at that level because of orthopedic injuries or some other health limitations. If a client's goal is to eliminate back pain, to increase balance and to be able to play with their grandchildren, plyometrics and intense sprinting is probably unnecessary. They will get more benefit from full body circuit training with active rests and with sets that include therapeutic exercises and stretching. When we look long term consistency is king because the most consistent person regardless of intensity will reap the most rewards of exercise.

The fact is low to moderate intensity workouts will produce significant results and keep your client healthy and pain free. If a person is capable of more and wants to work up to a high intensity program, I am not against it and agree that it works for some people. I believe the average person does not have an athletic history and is frequently deconditioned. In my personal experience, it seems that the people who need low intensity exercise the most believe it is a waste of time to work out if they aren't "dying" during a workout, and therefore they won't engage in lower intensity training. The truth is most Americans just need to move and do low level exercises to remove stress and to keep them healthy. For some people, exercise is a stress outlet, it helps them stay healthy, and it keeps their eating habits on track. Lower intensity exercise is also important for those who need to recover from their active lifestyle. For example, clients playing 2 hrs per day 4-5 times per week or those who are avid runners training 25 miles per week should focus their training on flexibility, recovery and exercising when they are in the gym. The goal should be to increase efficiency and to increase the longevity of participation in that activity.

My advice is to focus on the fundamentals and to get the client moving better and feeling good. Once you achieve this, then you and the client can decide what is next. Individualize the workouts and encourage them to meet their individual goals. Start with a solid foundation, and if high intensity is their goal, gradually build up to those type of workouts at a pace that works for the client physically and mentally.

Author

Charles DeFrancesco, NASM, NFPT

Contributions

Denise Groothuis, MS, RD

References

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4619258/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2723667/>

<https://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/news/20140401/too-much-running-tied-to-shorter-lifespan-studies-find>

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S053155651730503X?via%3Dihub>

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/doc-calls-deconditioning-a-conditio-12-08-15/>

<https://www.unm.edu/~lkravitz/Article%20folder/bonemass.html>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18296958/>

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/02/080228112008.htm>

<http://www.berkeleywellness.com/fitness/exercise/article/intense-aerobic-exercise-best>

<http://www.nytimes.com/health/guides/specialtopic/physical-activity/exercise's-effects-on-the-heart.html>

<https://health.gov/paguidelines/guidelines/chapter4.aspx>

<http://www.nytimes.com/health/guides/specialtopic/physical-activity/print.html>

<https://blog.paleohacks.com/low-intensity-high-intensity-exercise/>

<https://www.stoptheclot.org/news/athletes-and-blood-clots.htm>

<https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-statistics/overweight-obesity>

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.2165/11585920-000000000-00000>

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obesity-report-one-third-of-u-s-adults-are-beyond-overweight/>

<http://www.onyourmark.nyc/single-post/2016/02/24/Uncounted-Personal-Trainers-in-NYC-Lack-Certification-You-Get-ALL-The-Risk>

<https://www.menshealth.com/fitness/personal-trainers-2>